

D 51877

III: THE CALL FOR A CONVENTION

Let me now speak on another theme, one which, at this moment, arises naturally out of existing world and domestic conditions, and which relates more exclusively to the affairs of our own Party.

It seems to me that, in the light of changed and changing conditions, the time has come for the holding of a National Convention. The Liberals of all Canada should be afforded opportunity to review the Party's present position and policies, and to consider the most effective means by which Liberal principles may be applied to a solution of problems that have followed in the wake of war, and which will continue to present themselves in increasing measure, as nations seek to bring into being a new world order.

Previous Liberal Conventions

There have been but two dominion-wide Liberal Conventions since Confederation; the one held in this city in June, 1893, and the one held, also in Ottawa, in August, 1919. It is of interest to observe that from the date of Confederation these Conventions were held at intervals of 26 years, a little more than a quarter of a century. We of today have exceeded the 26 year period. It is now more than 28 years since the last nation-wide convention of the Party was held. It is also worthy of note that the conventions were called in anticipation of the next ensuing general elections, and that, in each case, they were followed by sweeping victories for the Party at the polls.

Reasons for Convention in Present Year — New Problems

There is another striking parallel. The convention of 1919 was called because of problems confronting the country as a result of years of war. These new problems, in the opinion of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, demanded the widest possible consideration by Liberals throughout the country, as well as by their representatives in Parliament. For some time past, I have held, very strongly, a like opinion in reference to the conditions which have arisen as a result of the last great war. The war which ended in 1918 was a war of four years; the recent war lasted over six years. Each of these world conflicts served to change considerably many aspects of our national economy; each brought new political parties to the fore, and each gave rise to questions and problems which, if not wholly new, were on a scale never heretofore experienced.

This of itself would seem to necessitate the calling of a convention at the earliest date at which it can be arranged, having in mind the length of time required to make the necessary arrangements, and to occasion as little as possible in the way of interference with the nation's business in Parliament.

There are, however, two additional reasons which I regard as of first importance. One is the question of Party Organization, and the other the question of Party Leadership.

The need for effective Party Organization

This is perhaps not the time nor the occasion to discuss Party Organization at any length. One thing is certain, however: no party, however good its principles, and however sound its policies, can

D 51878

hope in these days to win in a general election without the aid of an effective organization. This our party does not possess at the present time, nor has it since the last general election begun to have what is required to ensure the party's record and its policies being brought before the people as they should be. The Party does not possess in the Dominion, in the provinces, or in the constituencies, the kind of careful scrutiny of the party's position which should exist at all times, if full justice is to be done cause and candidates alike.

For such organization of a national character, as the Party has at the present time, we are indebted, in a very special measure, and for the most part, to our Chairman of this evening, Mr. Fogo, to his little band of workers on the Executive Council of the Federation, and to a few friends who have given them assistance from time to time. For far too long, far too much has rested on the shoulders of far too few. Mr. Fogo, I know, will be the first to tell you that the National Liberal Federation with its limited personnel and appropriations is wholly inadequate to cope with what is expected of it. As the Party's future is dependent in so great measure on its organization, I feel that the actual position should be known to the Party, and its members be given an opportunity, before it is too late, to make the necessary provision for this important branch of its work.

The Question of Party Leadership

Now a word as to the Party leadership. As you will recall, I was chosen Leader of our Party at the Convention held in this city, in August 1919, and have enjoyed this high position ever since. Should I be spared, and continue to command the confidence of my fellow-Liberals, to a corresponding date in the present year, I will then have entered upon my 30th year in the leadership of the Party. For very obvious reasons, I have for some time past been asking myself if the time had not arrived when the Party should be afforded an opportunity of choosing a new leader.

As you well know, I have not concealed my desire to be allowed to retire from active politics, just as soon as the Party's interests and the country's would seem to justify that step.

You will recall that, after the first Great War, Sir Robert Borden, who had been Prime Minister throughout the years of war, and Sir Wilfrid Laurier who had led the Opposition in those years, both felt that they should ask their followers to relieve them of continuing to carry the responsibilities and duties of leadership of their respective Parties. Though not stated at the time, this was one of the objects which Sir Wilfrid had in view when, in 1918, he issued the call for a convention in the following year. On more than one occasion, he so stated this intention to myself and others. Unhappily, Sir Wilfrid's life came to its close before the Convention, over which he had hoped to preside, assembled.

Sir Robert Borden, whose years in office and in the leadership of his Party, had been much fewer than those of Sir Wilfrid, felt it necessary to resign both as leader of his Party, and as Prime Minister, within less than two years of the Armistice which terminated hostilities.